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SUBJECT: WOMEN'S MONTH IN CAMEROON HIGHLIGHTS GAPS

¶1. (U) Summary. Amidst much celebration and fanfare, Cameroon celebrated International Women's Month and Day March 8, perhaps raising general awareness of some problems faced by Cameroonian women, but revealing troubling shortcomings in the vision and activities of the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and the Family (MINPROFF). POL/ECON OMS met with five prominent Cameroonian women from diverse backgrounds, each of them an activist for gender equality, to gauge public opinion on the month's highly publicized activities. Each contact raised concerns with MINPROFF's leadership, especially the Ministry's approach to International Women's Day as a day focused on public festivities, rather than activities beneficial to Cameroonian women. End Summary.

What Do Women Want?
Hairstyles and Dress Codes?

¶2. (U) POL/ECON OMS met separately with five prominent Cameroonian women - a lawyer, an activist, a radio station manager, a gender consultant, and the director of a university women's studies program - each of whom is well-regarded as an advocate for women's issues. They were unanimous in deriding the Government of Cameroon's (GRC) programming for the month of March as too centered on feel-good activities and public events, rather than on more pressing imperatives, like the development of a national gender policy or the general sensitization of Cameroonian to issues that affect women. POL/ECON OMS attended a MINPROFF planning meeting, where most of the attention focused on questions like how women should dress for the day ("not too revealing") and the musical performances planned for the month-long women's month carnivals. Embassy contacts generally agreed that, although MINPROFF held a small workshop to educate men about domestic violence, the majority of MINPROFF activities were similar to the planning discussion: unsubstantial, shallow, and doing little to effect meaningful change for women in Cameroon. Such activities included a publicized visit by Suzanne Mbomback, the Minister of Women's Empowerment and the Family, to present gifts to female prison inmates, a best-hairstyle contest, and a training session for women in markets on how to avoid littering.

Women's Ministry
Undermining the Message?

¶3. (SBU) Embassy contacts expressed alarm that some MINPROFF activities seemed to undermine the very principles of women's empowerment. In one program, MINPROFF hosted a highly publicized event to recognize women who had given birth to large numbers (10-15) of children. The Cameroonian women activists to whom we spoke feared that such activities effectively endorsed large family sizes in a country with booming population growth and widespread poverty, when a message of family planning and reproductive freedom would have been more appropriate.

¶4. (U) The GRC sponsored mass, public marriages for second and third wives in each of Cameroon's ten regions. The GRC argued that such ceremonies empowered women by formalizing their right to remain in the household. Embassy contacts, however, complained that such ceremonies legitimized polygamy rather than reforming widow and land rights [F1]for women. These mass marriages [F2]do much for the

public opinion of the Ministry, but little for the cause of women's empowerment, they added. Illustrative of MINPROFF's uncertain leadership, Mbomback thanked the U.N. during a public ceremony the week of March 8 for the U.N.'s support to a program to stop collective marriages. Nevertheless, Mbomback's ministry continued to carry out the GRC-sponsored collective marriages through the last week of March.

Wanted: MINPROFF Leadership

15. (U) POL/ECON sources stressed that until President Biya appoints a Minister of Women's Empowerment and the Family who is not a politician by trade, or a member of the ruling party, little real action will be taken to enact change for women in Cameroon from the top down. One source described Suzanne Mbomback as someone who "heads a machine, but is not a technician, so cannot fix the machine." The contact stressed that Mbomback lacks the technical knowledge, experience, and insight needed to correctly direct MINPROFF's programs. Contacts also complained that MINPROFF is closed off to the public and unwilling to communicate or share its programs, operational plans, or budget with civil society groups. MINPROFF's budget for Women's Month reportedly totaled about \$1 million, with no discernable outcome for women's issues in Cameroon.

Do the Celebrations Cost
More than Money?

16. (U) International Women's Day in Cameroon is, as much as anything, a month-long party for Cameroonian women with Women's Day itself (March 8) being the most raucous. The First Lady, Chantal Biya, held a publicized Women's month parade in the South Western part of the country on March 28 to close out a month of parties and public events. Unfortunately, the tone of the celebration among the general population is not primarily in the spirit of raising awareness on issues affecting women. Rather it takes on a rebellious tone where women and men believe it is the 'one day when women can behave like men.' This is construed by most Cameroonian as a day for women to consume alcohol and set aside child care responsibilities.

17. (U) Embassy contacts all agreed that the interpretation of Women's Day in Cameroon must change. Each cited examples of increased domestic violence on the night of Women's Day, primarily due to the confrontation that results from women's alcohol consumption in a deeply patriarchal country. They reported that police arrests of women also increased as a result of public disturbances and fighting in the streets. Embassy officers witnessed such altercations and visibly inebriated women in Yaounde neighborhoods. For example, the director of a woman's community radio station reported that her organization had sheltered five babies who had been abandoned by their mothers this year on Women's Day and brought by others to the radio station for help. At nightfall the babies were taken to the local police station, because the mothers still had not returned to look for their children. The women leaders each argued that the Women's Day events resulted in more women being exposed to rape and HIV/AIDS as a result of excessive drinking.

Nevertheless, Some Good

18. (U) Our contacts did concede that, despite its problems, Women's Month did have some impact in Cameroon. Particularly through the heavy television and radio coverage the topic received, the month drew attention to women's issues, and provided an outlet for women's voices to be heard. The promotion of the national Women's Day traditional cloth ("pagne") gave Cameroonian women a sense of pride and worth. The month also provided an opportunity for non-governmental and community groups to organize themselves around the theme, and take advantage of the increased media attention. While the GRC faltered on programming, a flourish of NGO activities took place, including conferences, debates, capacity building workshops and training sessions for women, particularly in Yaounde and Douala.

What is the USG Doing?

¶9. (U) Within its limited means, the Embassy continues to support actively the promotion of women's rights in Cameroon and seeks increased communication with MINPROFF. Moreover, the POL/ECON section engages in ongoing advocacy with the GRC and in dialogues with NGOs on a wide range of social and political issues affecting women. The Embassy's December 16 human rights roundtable featured a discussion of women's rights. The Self Help program at the Mission funds a program for vocational training for single mothers, as well as several grinding mill projects designed to benefit and employ women. Carrying a banner against domestic violence, for the third year in a row, Embassy women (direct hires, LES and spouses) marched in the International Women's Day parade, presented a group at the Women's Day tribunal, and attended a Women's Day Luncheon March 8. The Embassy also assisted the Peace Corps in organizing a booth showcasing gender development projects in Cameroon, set up for the week around Women's Day.

FOX

[F1]I don't understand this phrase.

[F2]What are "popular collective marriages"? Mass marriage ceremonies?